

The Use of Differentiated Instruction in LSP Courses in Moroccan Higher Education

Idriss Marjane & Youssef Tirizite

Faculty of Languages and Human Sciences,
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University of Fes, Morocco

Abstract: Differentiated instruction and LSP pedagogy have a shared purpose – identifying and responding to students’ diverse needs. The present study aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice by eliciting LSP instructors’ views about the use of differentiated instruction in the teaching of languages for specific purposes (LSP). The survey participants included twenty LSP instructors teaching English and French at a large polytechnic university in Morocco. The findings suggest that LSP instructors placed a high value on the use of differentiated instruction. Most of the participants recognized the importance and practicality of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses. Class size and lack of training represented the major barriers to the effective implementation of differentiated instruction in LSP courses.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, pedagogy, LSP, higher education, needs analysis

1. Introduction

Research-based practices enhance teaching and learning effectiveness. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) urged educators to “look for practices grounded in scholarship. They maintained that “our profession, like all other professions, strengthens as we engage in the cycle of examining practice, developing theory, and systematically investigating both theory and practice” (p. 173). In reference to primary and secondary education, Tomlinson (2017) noted that teaching and learning has been more unitary than differentiated. High-quality instruction is deemed to be one of the most important ingredients contributing to learner achievement. “High quality teaching entails providing students with prompt, informative feedback and is directed by analyses of achievement results often leading to the provision of differentiated instruction” (Leithwood et al., 2017).

In tertiary education, instruction is not optimally designed to foster effective learning strategies. University instructors still draw heavily upon traditional practices that have been shown to yield unsatisfactory results (Pilner & Johson, 2004). This by no means implies that the instructional approach is the only culprit. Several factors are at play in determining the success or failure of university students (see figure 1).

. Academic skills (Mull, Skitlington, & Alper, 2001)
. Self-regulatory strategies (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ruban &Reis, 2006)
. Difficulties in areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, memory, time management, and organization affect learner achievement (Allsopp, Minskiff, & Bolt, 2005; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997; Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provanic, Sen, & Tobin, 2004)
. Level of engagement is affected by students’ previous education experiences (Kuh, 2007)
. Instructors’ beliefs about the process of a student-centered, learning-oriented epistemology promotes learning teaching and learning. A teacher-centered, transmission-oriented epistemology inhibits learning (Kember 1997, 2001; Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, & Mayes, 2005; Samuellowicz & Bain, 2001; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999)
. Interactive and collaborative activities that are aligned with students’ interests, beliefs and background promote efficacy (Hake, 1998,2006; Putnam & Burko, 2000)

Figure 1: Factors affecting learner achievement in higher education (adapted from Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009)

Differentiated instruction has been proposed as a viable alternative to the dominant teaching-based model currently in use in many universities across the globe (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009). “While differentiated learning is emphasized in K-12 classrooms, less attention is given to differentiation at the university level.” (Hartshorne et al., 2012). Guided by research in cognitive psychology (Rock, Gregg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008), differentiated learning was initially

designed to accommodate the needs of students in special and gifted education (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Waldron & McClesky, 1998). Differentiated instruction is a multidisciplinary construct and its exponents “draw on wide research of theories and research to provide validation” (Wood and Blanton, 2012, p. 148).

Second language acquisition (SLA) has been extensively researched and yielded insightful findings. “One of the fundamental goals of SLA research is to facilitate and expedite the SLA process and appropriate instruction will undeniably make a contribution” (Freeman-Larsen & Long, 2016) There little research examining the effects of differentiated instruction practices on instructed SLA. This may be the case because differentiated instruction is regarded as “a way of thinking about teaching and learning that can be translated into classroom practices in many ways” (Blaz, 2016, p.5).

Since the early 1960s, language for specific purposes (LSP) has become one of the most important areas of teaching in universities around the world. It began as a peripheralized mode of instruction which emphasized the teaching of specialized vocabulary to students in vocational schools. Today, “LSP plays a critical role globally evidenced by the massive growth of higher education institutions offering English-medium instruction” (Raitskaya, 2018, p.1). Given the nature of LSP, it seems evident that the integration of differentiated instruction practices into LSP courses would lead to better learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language for Specific Purposes

“LSP may be considered as an approach to course design and teaching that targets groups of learners who have a common goal or purpose in learning English” (Woodrow, 2018, p.5). The content of the ESP course should therefore reflect the language-based objectives of the students in the target occupation or academic discipline (Basturkmen, 2010)

In LSP, the learner is viewed as a responsible individual who is able to stipulate the language goals and needs they have for pursuing a language course. In a general ELT situation, goals are generally defined by instructors or by the curriculum. In an LSP situation, the end justifies the means. In other words, the ‘real world’ objectives dictate the language items to be taught and the types of activities to be done. For example, students on an English-for-medicine course may want to learn how to explain a medical condition to a patient. In this situation, language development is a footbridge to a more practical goal which is being able to communicate in the target situation.

A fundamental aspect of LSP is the specificity of needs. Identifying specific learning needs is the first step in ESP courses. In this regard, Hyland (2002) notes that “commitment to the goal of providing language instruction that addresses students’ own specific language learning purposes is what those who take an English for Specific Purposes (LSP) approach see as distinguishing it from other approaches to English language Teaching (EIT)”.

2.2 Differentiated Instruction

In collegiate level, adaptive teaching, or in-the-moment decisions refer to the kind of methodological adjustments that teachers make to take account of student's emerging needs. Irrespective of the terminology used, many scholars place great emphasis on reflective practice and a heightened awareness of learner variance. (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000: Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald, & Zeichner, 2005; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005).

A differentiated classroom promotes equity and excellence by providing "different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively." (Tomlinson, 2017, p.1). In other words, the school curriculum and teaching strategies should reflect the needs, interests and learning profiles of students. Differentiated instruction has been established as an effective teaching approach in the primary and secondary education (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Olenchak, 2001; Piggott; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Instruction can be differentiated on the basis of eight variables: students' interests, motivation, background knowledge, prior experiences, culture and language proficiency, and instructional reading and writing levels (Tompkins, 2006). Tomlinson (2017) listed three factors that influence the choice of differentiation strategy: readiness, interest and learning profile.

- Readiness describes what students already know and what they can do. "Readiness is not synonymous with intellectual ability; it is a much broader and deeper construct that is shaped by prior learning and life experiences, attitudes about school, as well as cognitive and metacognitive proficiency" (Tomlinson, 2009, p. 308). Readiness differentiation is based Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Learning is promoted by the assistance of more capable peers. Students learn best when they receive help to complete tasks that are somewhat above their current ability. (Daniels, 2001).
- Arousing students' interests by choosing topics and processes that are relevant to students' lives is an effective way to fire students' imagination, increase their motivation and foster a sense of belonging. (Tomlinson, 2017)
- Learning profile refers to the ways different students tend to process knowledge and interact with their peers. In addition to identifying students' preferred learning modalities, educators are advised to set clear learning objectives and use a variety of instructional methods to aid learning. (Stahl, 1999, Landrum & McDuffie, 2010, Chamberlin & Powers, 2010).

Differentiating instruction is a dynamic and iterative operation which affects the three key elements of a curriculum: planning (content), implementation (process), products (evaluation) and the learning environment:

- Content: what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information. The content is generally differentiated by scaffolding the learning process, rather than changing the content to accommodate students 'readiness level.

- Process: activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content. The process is differentiated by using goal-oriented activities that facilitate learning and promote higher-level thinking.
- Products: culminating projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit. The product is differentiated by providing students with multiple pathways to demonstrate their knowledge and skill based on a set of criteria designed to guarantee a fair evaluation process.

Tomlinson's model is regarded as the most comprehensive and frequently cited in professional literature (Hall et al., 2003). Tomlinson (2017) lists seven principles which undergird the theoretical basis of differentiated instruction.

1. *Differentiated instruction is proactive.* Having learner variance in mind, instructors can plan lessons that address the perceived needs of individual learners.
2. *Differentiated instruction is more qualitative than quantitative.* The goal of differentiated instruction is not to increase or decrease the amount of work students do in class. Rather, differentiation involves altering the nature of the assignment to match the actual student needs.
3. *Differentiated instruction is rooted in assessment.* Assessment is used as a feedback mechanism to gain insights into students' developmental stage.
4. *Differentiated instruction is eclectic.* Differentiating instruction uses a variety of activities and strategies to differentiate what students learn, how they learn, and the means by which they are assessed.
5. *Differentiated instruction uses a combination of interactional modes* – whole-class, group, and individual instruction.
6. *Differentiated instruction is student-centered.* Differentiated instruction builds on students' prior knowledge, makes use of engaging and relevant content, and encourages learner autonomy.
7. *Differentiated instruction is organic and dynamic.* It is an ongoing process guided by feedback from learners which instructors can use to refine the process.

One of the key benefits of differentiated instruction in higher education is that it supports a more personalized learning experience for students. By recognizing and accommodating students' individual needs and preferences, instructors can create a learning environment that is more engaging and relevant to each student. This can lead to increased motivation and a greater sense of ownership over their learning process, which can help to improve student success and retention rates (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Another benefit of differentiated instruction in higher education is that it can help to create a more inclusive learning environment. By acknowledging and accommodating the diverse needs and strengths of students, instructors can create a sense of belonging for all students in the classroom. This can be particularly important for students who may have historically been marginalized or underserved in higher education, such as first-generation college students or students from underrepresented groups (Kohli, 2020).

3. Purpose and Research questions

In an independent survey commissioned by the British Council, 1200 respondents ranging in age from 15 to 25 expressed their approval and enthusiasm for the Moroccan government's decision to shift to English as the primary foreign language both in secondary and higher education. (*Shift to English / British Council Morocco*, n.d.). As English has acquired a higher social and educational status, the need for sound pedagogical practices cannot be overestimated. The present study aimed to fill a gap in the extant literature in the area of LSP pedagogy by examining LSP instructors' perceptions of the use of differentiated instruction in LSP courses. Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do LSP instructors in higher education define differentiated instruction?
2. How often do language instructors use instructional strategies?
3. To what extent is differentiated instruction relevant in LSP programs?
4. What are the benefits and challenges in planning and implementing differentiated instruction?

4. Methods

The questions used in the survey were developed based upon the work of Turner, Solis, Kinade, (2017). The survey used closed-ended questions. To answer the questions, the participants had to choose one or more answers from a list of four answers (see appendix). The study targeted language instructors teaching English and French (dominant languages in Morocco) in tertiary education. The questionnaire included four sections: *demographic information* (age, gender, teaching experience, language of instruction), *types of taught LSP courses* and eight *multiple choice questions*. The purpose of the study was also included at the top of the survey. The survey questions were designed to elicit information for exploring the research questions (see Table 1).

5. Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were collected by means of an online survey created through Google Form. Convenience sampling was used to collect specific information about the target population. The survey was emailed to twenty-five participants working as language instructors at Mohamed VI Polytechnic University. UM6P is a Moroccan non-profit private research university. Its main campus is located in Ben Guerir, near Marrakech, with branches in Rabat and Laayoune. The university is an institution oriented towards applied research and innovation and is engaged in economic and human development, with a focus on African development. The survey was completed by twenty participants.

Table 1: Age

Age range	Number	Percent
25-35	1	5%
35-45	9	45%
45-55	10	50%

Table 2: Teaching experience

Years of teaching experience	Number	Percentage
5-10	1	5%
10-15	3	15%
15-20	5	25%
20-30	11	55%

Table 3: Types of LSP course frequently taught (n=20)

Types of LSP course	n	percentage
Academic purposes	15	75%
General purposes	17	85%
Medical purposes	5	25%
Engineering	10	50%
Business	13	65%
Science and technology	7	35%

The participants included 18 males (90%) and 2 females (10%). Fifteen taught English and four taught French. The age of the participants ranges from 35 to 55 years old (see table 1). Over Three quarters of the participants have more than fifteen years of teaching experience (see table 2). Language for academic and general purposes top the list of the LSP courses taught by the participants. Language for business and engineering are also frequently taught courses (see table 3)

Table 4: Research Questions (RQ) and Perception Survey Questions (Q)

Research questions	Topical concept	Survey questions
RQ1	Definitional angle	Q5
RQ2	Use of differentiated instructional strategies in LSP contexts	Q6 Q8
RQ3	Relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP contexts	Q7 Q9 Q10
RQ4	Benefits and challenges of using differentiated instruction in LSP	Q11 Q12

Table 5: Participants' Definition of Differentiated Instruction (n= 20)

	Definitional angle	Number of endorsements	Percentage of Endorsements
Benjamin, 2002	Instructional method	6	30%
Tomlinson, 2001	Planning	6	30%
Chapman & King, 2003	Philosophy	7	35%
Walpole & McKenna	Assessment	1	5%

One third of the participants chose the definition proposed by Benjamin (2002) which describes differentiated instruction as an instructional method. The other third selected Tomlinson's (2001) definition which stresses the importance of planning. The definition put forward by Chapman and King 2013 was chosen by the 35% of the participants. Only one participant opted for assessment as a key defining feature of differentiated instruction (see table 5).

Over half of the participants reported they use differentiated practices on a regular basis and two fifths use differentiated practices sporadically. Only one participant never uses differentiated practices (see table 6). With regard to the importance of this instructional model. 55% of the participants regard using differentiated instruction as extremely important. 40% of the participants see differentiated practices as somewhat important (see table 7). The majority of the participants were familiar with differentiated instruction. (60% through workshops and conferences, 25% read some literature and 15% received no training whatsoever). (See table 8)

Table 6: Frequency of use of Instructional Strategies in LSP Programs (n=20)

Response	n	Percentage
I do not use differentiated practices	1	5%
I use differentiated practices sporadically	8	40%
I use differentiated practices on a regular basis.	11	55%

Table 7: Opinion about using differentiated instruction in LSP programs (n=20)

Response	n	Percentage
Not effective	1	5%
Somewhat important	8	40%
Extremely important	11	55%

Table 8: Type of training in differentiated instruction (n=20)

Response	n	Percentage
none	3	13%
Read some literature	5	25%
Attended a workshop and/or conference	7	35%
Attended several workshops and/or conference	5	25%

The overwhelming majority of participants view differentiated instruction as both practical and reasonable (see table 9). A little over three quarters of the participants regarded differentiated instruction as significant and worthy of the effort required to implement (see table 10). Over half of the participants believed that class size and lack of training present a challenge to the implementation of differentiated instruction. Less than a third of the participants viewed lack of resources as another challenge. A quarter of the participants attribute the challenge of implement to lack of instructional time (see table 11).

Table 9: Relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP programs (n=20)

Response	n	Percentage
Impractical but reasonable	1	5%
Practical but unreasonable	1	5%
Practical and reasonable	18	90%

Table 10: Benefits of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses

Response	n	Percentage
Insignificant but somewhat worthy of the effort	1	5%
Significant but not worthy of the effort	3	15%
Significant and worthy of the effort	16	80%

Table 11: Challenges of implementation (n=20)

Response	n	Percentage
Class size	12	60%
Lack of instructional time	5	25%
Lack of resources	7	35%
Lack of training	12	60%

6. Discussion

6.1 Differentiation instruction

Instructors participating in the study have different perspectives about the essential elements of differentiated instruction. 30% of the participants identified differentiation as an instructional method. 30% emphasized planning in the differentiation process. 35% conceptualized

differentiated instruction as a philosophy. It is apparent that the participants have different perspectives about the essence of differentiated instruction.

Grouping of students is based on individual strengths and needs determined by teacher-administered assessments. Assessment is the starting point of the differentiation process. It is worth noting that only one participant identified assessment as an essential element in differentiated instruction. The participants' differing views of differentiated instruction is reflected in the extant literature. This definitional variation or disparity "can potentially lead to lack of clarity in both research and practice" (Wood & Blanton, 2012). Wood and Blanton (2012) attributed this conceptual imprecision to "how individual differences are categorized and what is necessary for differentiation to occur" (p.146). Wood and Blanton (2012) proposed a definition that merged the key concepts from the field: "*Differentiated instruction* is a concept that embodies both a philosophy of addressing individual needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms and the instructional approaches embedded within and supportive of that philosophy" (p. 146).

6.2 Frequency and effectiveness of strategy use in LSP programs

Over 50% of the instructors participating in this study reported they used differentiated strategies on a regular basis. Two fifths reported they used differentiated strategies sporadically. The high frequency of strategy use can be explained by the instructor's beliefs about the effectiveness of the instructional model. Over 90% of the participants recognized the importance of differentiated instruction in their classroom practices. Brighton (2003) noted that for differentiated instruction to occur, "teachers may need to change both "beliefs about the nature of schooling and their resulting classroom practice" (p. 177).

The high percentages in favor of differentiated practices may also be attributed to the nature of the content area. Language instruction is a dynamic research area and many publications tackled issues related to teaching approaches and methods (e.g., Richards & Renandya, 2002). In addition, the instructors' long experience teaching a variety of courses as well as their involvement in academic projects may have familiarized them with different types of teaching approaches. Surprisingly, Instructors teaching other disciplines tend to "depend primarily on one pedagogy" (Turner et al, 2017, p. 495).

6.3 Relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP contexts

There is a general consensus on the practicality of differentiated instruction in LSP courses. 90% of the instructors in this study believed that differentiated instruction is both practical and reasonable. The reported relevance of differentiated instruction in LSP courses may be explained by the nature of the student population enrolled in LSP courses. Language courses in postsecondary education are populated by students from a variety of disciplines and with differing levels of proficiency. It would make sense to adopt a pedagogy that advocates instructional strategies that respond to the individual needs of students. Moreover, the theoretical underpinnings of differentiated instruction are in line with the principles of LSP

teaching. For example, in differentiated instruction, pre-assessment tasks are used to identify students' readiness level. LSP instructors use placement tests and needs analysis instruments to develop courses that would match students' differing communicative needs.

6.4 Benefits and challenges of implementing differentiated instruction in LSP courses

80% of the participants reported they find differentiated instruction as significant and worthy of the effort. Santangelo and Tomlinson (2009) conceded that "effective differentiation requires a significant amount of time, effort and dedication on the part of the instructor (p. 320). The majority of the instructors in this study seemed willing to do the additional work required to implement this instructional model in LSP courses.

60% of the participants reported the successful execution of differentiated instruction in LSP courses can be thwarted by class size and lack of training. Additional obstacles include "content coverage demands, lack of planning time and funding, grading policies, and resistance to changing current practices" (Wood & Blanton, 2012, p. 152). For example, it can be time-consuming for instructors to design and deliver instruction that is tailored to the needs of groups of students. In addition, instructors may need to provide additional resources and support to help students who are struggling to keep up with the pace of the course.

7. Conclusion

"There have been numerous studies conducted that show that even after receiving a great deal of training on differentiated instruction, most teachers are still not putting it into practice in the classroom." (O'Meara, 2010, p. 2). In addition, Empirical data supporting the effectiveness of differentiated instruction is, however, lacking. Tomlinson et al., (2003) warned that more work needs to be done to quantify the benefits of differentiated instruction on student outcomes. Although the results of the present study cannot be generalizable given the small size of the sample, key findings suggest a. Differentiated instruction is a common practice in LSP courses, b. LSP instructors have positive opinions about differentiated instruction, c. LSP instructors already use differentiated strategies despite the perceived challenges and d. Differentiated instruction is congruent with the principles of LSP pedagogy. Further research is needed to identify the types of instructional practices employed by LSP instructors and measure their effects on the development of communicative competence.

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Appendix

The Use of Differentiated Instruction in LSP courses.

1. Age

25 - 35

35 - 45

45 - 55

55- 65

2. Gender

Female

Male

3. Years of Teaching Experience

5 - 10

10 - 15

15 - 20

20 - 30

3. Language you teach

French

English

4. Which LSP course/s do you regularly teach?

Academic purposes

General purposes

Medical purposes

Engineering

Business

Science and technology

Other:

5. Which definition best captures the essence of differentiated instruction?

Differentiated instruction refers to a variety of classroom practices that allow for differences in students' learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs, and comfort zones

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs

Differentiated instruction is philosophy that enables teachers to plan strategically in order to reach the needs of diverse learners in the classroom today

Differentiated instruction is both driven and monitored by assessment

6. How would you describe your use of differentiated instruction?

a. I do not use differentiated practices.

b. I use differentiated practices sporadically.

c. I use differentiated practices on a regular basis.

7. Which type of training in differentiated instruction have you received?

a. None.

b. Read some literature.

c. Attended a workshop and/or conference presentation.

d. Attended several workshops and/or conference presentations.

8. How often do you engage in direct whole-class instruction?

a. Seldom (under 10%).

- b. Frequently (10% - 40%).
 - c. Often (40% - 60%).
 - d. Always (60% or more).
9. How would you describe your personal opinion about using differentiated instruction in LSP courses?
- a. Not effective
 - b. A buzzword that will fade.
 - c. Somewhat important.
 - d. Extremely important.
10. How would you describe the practicality of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses ?
- a. Impractical and unreasonable.
 - b. Impractical but reasonable.
 - c. practical but unreasonable.
 - d. Practical and reasonable.
11. How would you describe the benefits of using differentiated instruction in LSP courses?
- a. Insignificant and not worthy of the effort required to implement.
 - b. Insignificant but somewhat worthy of the effort required to implement
 - c. Significant but not worthy of the effort required to implement
 - d. Significant and worthy of the effort required to implement.
12. Which of the following makes differentiated instruction in LSP courses challenging to implement (select more than one answer if applicable?)
- a. Lack of training.
 - b. Lack of resources.
 - c. Lack of instructional time.
 - d. Class size
- Other: